

Child Welfare Outcomes 2002: **Executive Summary**



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
ADMINISTRATION ON CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES
CHILDREN'S BUREAU

Executive Summary

CHILD WELFARE OUTCOMES 2002: ANNUAL REPORT TO CONGRESS

Child Welfare Outcomes 2002: Annual Report to Congress (Report to Congress) is the fifth in a series of annual reports from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (the Department).¹ The reports are developed in accordance with section 479A of the Social Security Act (as amended by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997) and provide information pertaining to State performance on the following national child welfare outcomes:²

- Outcome 1—Reduce recurrence of child abuse and/or neglect
- Outcome 2—Reduce the incidence of child abuse and/or neglect in foster care
- Outcome 3—Increase permanency for children in foster care
- Outcome 4—Reduce time in foster care to reunification without increasing re-entry
- Outcome 5—Reduce time in foster care to adoption
- Outcome 6—Increase placement stability
- Outcome 7—Reduce placements of young children in group homes or institutions

The Department established these national outcomes in consultation with State and local child welfare agency administrators, child advocacy organizations, child welfare researchers, and other experts in the child welfare field. The outcomes reflect widely accepted performance objectives for child welfare practice and adherence to a set of guiding principles. The purpose of the Report to Congress is to improve outcomes for children and families served by the Nation's child welfare system by providing data pertaining to State

¹ The unit of the Department that has primary responsibility for this report is the Children's Bureau within the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, in the Administration for Children and Families.

² In the Report to Congress, the designation of "State" includes the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Therefore the Report provides information on 52 "States."

performance on key outcomes over time. To this end, the Report to Congress presents data for each State regarding: (1) 12 measures developed to assess the national outcomes listed above; and (2) such contextual factors as the number and characteristics of children who are the subject of substantiated child abuse or neglect reports and of children in the State's foster care system. The report also presents key findings across States with regard to the relationship between contextual factors and State performance on the outcome measures. Data pertaining to the measures and the contextual factors come from the Federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System.

In addition to the State data, discussions of State performance in the Report to Congress incorporate information from the Department's Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). Although the Report to Congress and the CFSR represent separate activities within the Department, both are designed to provide information that can be used by States to improve their child welfare services and child outcomes. The CFSR examines State child welfare system operations through case reviews and interviews with stakeholders and determines each State's conformity with seven outcomes and seven systemic factors. The CFSR also assesses each State's performance on 6 outcome measures selected from the 12 measures developed for the Report to Congress. Prior to implementation of the CFSR, the Department established national standards for these six measures that are used to determine State conformity with specific outcomes.

The following sections of the Executive Summary provide key findings from the Report to Congress.

State Performance in Preventing Maltreatment Recurrence (Outcome 1)

Children's safety is the major concern of the Nation's child welfare systems. One indicator of child safety is whether children who are victims of maltreatment are protected from further abuse or neglect. To assess State performance with regard to keeping children safe, the Department developed the following outcome and measure.

Outcome 1—Reduce recurrence of child abuse and/or neglect.

Outcome measure 1.1—Of all children who were victims of substantiated or indicated child abuse and/or neglect during the first 6 months of the reporting period, what percentage had another substantiated or indicated report within a 6-month period?

In 2002, many States experienced challenges in preventing the recurrence of child maltreatment. For the 42 States providing sufficient data to calculate outcome measure 1.1, the incidence of maltreatment recurrence within a 6-month period ranged from 1.2 percent to 13.7 percent, with a median of 7.5 percent. Only 16 of the 42 States (38 percent) met the national standard established for this measure (6.1 percent or less).

Interpreting State performance on this outcome measure, however, requires a consideration of at least one key aspect of the State context—the rate of child victims per 1,000 children in the population.³ In 2002, the rate of child victims varied considerably across States, from 1.8 per 1,000 children in the population to 41.3 per 1,000 children in the population. The national median for all States was 10.8 child victims per 1,000 children in the population.

A substantial positive relationship was found between a State's rate of child victims and the State's percentage of maltreatment recurrence (Spearman's rho = +0.613). In general, States with a relatively high rate of child victims tended to have a relatively high percentage of maltreatment recurrence within a 6-month period, and vice versa. This relationship suggests that State performance on the measure of maltreatment recurrence may be at least in part a function of State policies and definitions regarding child maltreatment. For example, State definitions of child maltreatment that are relatively broad in scope may result in both higher victim rates and higher maltreatment recurrence percentages than those found in States with narrower definitions of child maltreatment.

³ A child victim is defined as a child who is the subject of a substantiated or indicated maltreatment report.

CFSR findings identified the following as barriers to preventing maltreatment recurrence that were found in at least one-third of the States:

- Agency risk and safety assessments often are not sufficiently comprehensive to capture underlying family issues that contribute to maltreatment, such as substance abuse, mental illness, and domestic violence.
- The child welfare agency is not consistent in providing sufficient services to address risk of harm to children, particularly in cases in which children remain in their homes.
- The child welfare agency does not consistently monitor families to assess service participation and change in risk factors.

State Performance in Preventing Maltreatment of Children in Foster Care (Outcome 2)

The child welfare focus on keeping children safe applies to children in foster care as well as children in their own homes. When children are removed from their homes and placed in alternative living situations, it is a State's responsibility to ensure that these living situations are safe. The Department established the following outcome and measure to assess State performance with regard to this responsibility.

Outcome 2—Reduce the incidence of child abuse and/or neglect in foster care.

Outcome measure 2.1—Of all children who were in foster care during the reporting period, what percentage was the subject of substantiated or indicated maltreatment by a foster parent or facility staff member?

In 2002, of the 42 States providing sufficient data to calculate outcome measure 2.1, the percentage of children in foster care who were victims of maltreatment by foster parents or facility staff ranged from 0.05 to 1.62, with a median of 0.39. The median performance across States was actually less than the national standard (0.57 percent or less) and 25 (59 percent) of the 42 States met the national standard. In addition, State performance on this measure improved from 1999 to 2002.

Information from the CFSR suggests that States promote the safety of children in foster care by establishing licensing standards for foster homes and care facilities, including standards that prevent overcrowding in foster homes and standards regarding use of restraints and corporal punishment. Children's safety also is supported when States mandate training for foster parents and facility staff both before licensure and on an ongoing basis.

State Performance in Achieving Permanency for Children in Foster Care (Outcome 3)

A primary goal of child welfare services is to find permanent homes for children in foster care through reunification with their families, adoption, or legal guardianship. The Department developed the following outcome and measures to assess performance with regard to this goal.

Outcome 3—Increase permanency for children in foster care.

- *Outcome measure 3.1—For all children who exited foster care during the reporting period, what percentage left to either reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship?*
- *Outcome measure 3.2—For children who exited foster care and were identified as having a diagnosed disability, what percentage left to either reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship?*
- *Outcome measure 3.3—For children who exited foster care and were older than age 12 at the time of their most recent entry into care, what percentage left to either reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship?*
- *Outcome measure 3.4—Of all children exiting foster care to emancipation, what percentage was age 12 or younger at the time of entry into foster care?*
- *Outcome measure 3.5—For all children who exited foster care, what percentage by racial/ethnic category left to either reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship?*

Most States were successful in achieving permanency for children exiting foster care. The percentage of all children exiting foster care in FY 2002 who were reunified, adopted, or placed with a legal guardian ranged across States from 73.4 to 94.8 with a median of 86.1. In most States, the majority of children achieved permanency through reunification with primary caretakers or

permanent placement with relatives (median = 65.1 percent). The national median for the percentage of children discharged to adoption was 16.2 percent, and the national median for the percentage of children discharged to a legal guardianship was 2.2 percent.

In FY 2002, States were generally successful in achieving permanency for most children exiting foster care. They were less successful, however, if the children exiting foster care had a diagnosed disability or were age 13 or older when they entered foster care. For example, while the median percentage exiting to permanency for all children was 86.1, the median percentage for children with a diagnosed disability was 79.8, and the median percentage for children age 13 and older at the time of entry into foster care was 72.0.

Although only a small percentage of children exiting foster care in most States were emancipated (a median of 6.6 percent in FY 2002), the percentage of children exiting to emancipation who were age 12 or younger when they entered foster care ranged from 8.8 to 61.0 with a median of 26.9. In more than 50 percent of the States, at least one-fourth of the children emancipated appear to have grown up in foster care.

State Performance with Regard to Reunifying Children in a Timely Manner (Outcome 4)

Although achieving permanency for children in foster care is an important role of the child welfare agency, there is concern in the field that States are not consistent in their efforts to ensure that children achieve permanency in a timely manner. The Department established the following outcome and measures to assess State performance with regard to reunifying children with their families safely and in a timely manner.

Outcome 4—Reduce time in foster care to reunification without increasing re-entry.

- *Outcome measure 4.1—Of all children who were reunified with their parents or caretakers at the time of discharge from foster care, what percentage was reunified in the following time periods?*
 - (1) *less than 12 months*
 - (2) *at least 12 months but less than 24 months*

(3) at least 24 months but less than 36 months

(4) at least 36 months but less than 48 months

(5) 48 or more months

- *Outcome measure 4.2—Of all children who entered foster care during the reporting period, what percentage re-entered care within 12 months of a prior foster care episode?*

With respect to outcome measure 4.1, the Department determined that reunification was timely if it occurred within 12 months of the child's entry into foster care. The Department also established a national standard for this measure of 76.2 percent or more. The incidence of reunifications in FY 2002 that occurred within 12 months of entry into foster care ranged across States from 38.8 percent to 90.5 percent, with a median of 68.1 percent. Although only 18 States (37 percent) met the national standard established for this measure, this represents a considerable increase from FY 1999, when only 22 percent of the States met the national standard.

It is difficult to interpret State performance with regard to reunifications occurring within 12 months of entry into foster care. One reason for this difficulty is the consistent finding (in FYs 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002) of a positive relationship between the percentage of reunifications occurring within 12 months of entry into foster care and the percentage of children entering foster care who were re-entering within 12 months of a prior foster care episode (Spearman's rho⁴ = +0.546 for FY 2002). In general, States with a relatively high percentage of reunifications within 12 months tended to have a relatively high percentage of re-entries into foster care within 12 months. For example, although 22 States (44 percent) met the national standard established for re-entry within 12 months of a prior foster care episode (8.6 percent or less), only 1 State that met the national standard for this measure also met the national standard for the percentage of reunifications occurring within 12 months of entry into foster care.

It is not known at this time why this relationship occurs with such consistency. One explanation may be that States with high percentages of reunifications

⁴ Spearman's rho is a rank-order correlation coefficient used when one or both variables is on an ordinal scale.

within 12 months and high re-entry rates may be reunifying children without adequately addressing the issues that required the child to be removed from home in the first place.

Another reason why it is difficult to interpret State performance with regard to timely reunification is the positive relationship that was found in FY 2002 between a State's percentage of reunifications occurring within 12 months of entry into foster care and the State's rate of entry of children into foster care (the number of children entering foster care per 1,000 children in the population) (Spearman's $\rho = +0.405$). States with a relatively high rate of entry into foster care tended to have a relatively high percentage of children reunified within 12 months of entry into foster care and vice versa. This association may be attributed to the possibility that States with a high rate of entry into foster care may be more likely than other States to remove children from the home on a short-term basis, either to assess the family situation or to address a current crisis situation. As a result, such States would be more likely to reunify a larger percentage of children within a short time frame than States that do not engage in this practice.

It also is difficult to interpret State performance with regard to the percentage of re-entries into foster care occurring within 12 months of exit from a prior foster care episode. This difficulty may be attributed to the positive relationship found between the percentage of children entering foster care in a State who were age 16 and older and the percentage of children entering foster care who were re-entering within 12 months of a prior episode (Spearman's $\rho = +0.456$). Generally, States with a relatively high percentage of children entering foster care in FY 2002 who were 16 and older tended to have a relatively high percentage of children entering foster care who were re-entering within 12 months of a prior episode. Eight States were in the top quartile (which included 13 States) of the ranking for both the percentage of children age 16 and older entering foster care and the percentage of re-entries into foster care. Seven of these were States in which the child welfare system provides out-of-home placement services to children from the juvenile justice system. These findings indicate that States providing child welfare foster care services to older children, and particularly those States whose child welfare systems serve juvenile justice populations, are more likely to have a higher incidence of re-entry than States whose child welfare systems do not serve this population.

CFSR findings suggest that a key barrier to achieving reunification in a timely manner is a lack of adequate and/or timely services to parents (18 States). In addition, a key barrier to preventing re-entry is a lack of sufficient and adequate post-reunification services to assist the family in the reintegration process (13 States). Both of these findings suggest that the availability of appropriate services is critical to ensuring both timely reunification and the prevention of re-entry.

State Performance with Regard to Achieving Adoptions in a Timely Manner (Outcome 5)

In response to a concern that children in foster care who are not reunified with their families tend to spend many years in foster care before a finalized adoption occurs, the Department established the following outcome and measure.

Outcome 5—Reduce time in foster care to adoption.

Outcome measure 5.1—Of all children who exited foster care to a finalized adoption, what percentage exited care in the following time periods?

- (1) Less than 12 months from the time of the latest removal from home*
- (2) At least 12 months but less than 24 months*
- (3) At least 24 months but less than 36 months*
- (4) At least 36 months but less than 48 months*
- (5) 48 or more months*

The Department also determined that concerted efforts should be made to achieve a finalized adoption for children within 24 months of entry into foster care. A national standard was established for this measure of 32.0 percent or more children adopted within 24 months of the time of entry into foster care.

In FY 2002, the percentage of adoptions occurring within 24 months of entry into foster care ranged extensively across States from 5.2 to 77.9 with a median of 23.0. Only 12 (28 percent) of the 43 States included in the analysis met the

national standard established for this measure.⁵ However, the vast majority of States (72 percent) improved in performance from FY 2000 to FY 2002 with regard to the percentage of adoptions occurring within 24 months of entry into foster care.

FY 2002 data also indicate that there is a substantial, negative, relationship between the percentage of Black children in a State's foster care population and the percentage of adoptions occurring within 24 months of a child's entry into foster care (Spearman's rho = -0.498). States with a relatively high percentage of Black children in foster care tended to have a relatively low percentage of adoptions finalized within 24 months of entry into foster care, and vice versa. Additional research and information is necessary to uncover the specific factors that may explain this relationship.

Information in the CFSR report identifies the following as potential barriers to achieving adoption in a timely manner:

- The agency or court is inconsistent with regard to seeking termination of parental rights (TPR) in accordance with the provisions of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (26 States).
- Many judges are reluctant to terminate parental rights, either because adequate services have not been provided to parents or because an adoptive family has not been identified (19 States).
- There are delays in attaining TPR because of crowded court dockets and/or a lengthy appeals process (20 States).
- The agency is not consistent with regard to conducting adoption home studies or completing adoption paperwork in a timely manner (17 States).

⁵ Three States were excluded because 20 percent or more of the exits from foster care did not have "reason for discharge" information. Six States were excluded because there was a substantial discrepancy between the number of children reported to the AFCARS Adoption Database as adopted in FY 2002 and the number of children reported to the AFCARS Foster Care Database as exits to a finalized adoption in FY 2002.

State Performance in Ensuring Stable and Age-Appropriate Placements for Children in Foster Care (Outcomes 6 and 7)

When children are removed from their homes by the State and placed in alternative living situations, it is the responsibility of the State to ensure that these children's alternative living situations are stable and age-appropriate. The Department developed the following outcomes and measures to assess State performance in meeting this responsibility.

Outcome 6—Increase placement stability.

Outcome measure 6.1—Of all children served who had been in foster care for the time periods listed below, what percentage had no more than two placement settings during that time period?

- (1) Less than 12 months from the time of latest removal from home*
- (2) At least 12 months but less than 24 months*
- (3) At least 24 months but less than 36 months*
- (4) At least 36 months but less than 48 months*
- (5) 48 or more months*

Outcome 7—Reduce placements of young children in group homes or institutions.

Outcome Measure 7.1—For all children who entered foster care during the reporting period and were age 12 or younger at the time of their most recent placement, what percentage was placed in a group home or institution?

With regard to placement stability, the percentage of children in foster care for less than 12 months who experienced no more than two placement settings ranged from 55.3 to 99.8, with a median of 84.1. However, only 14 States (27 percent) met the national standard (86.7 percent or more) established for this measure. In addition, in FY 2002, the percentage of children experiencing no more than two placement settings declined substantially with increasing time in foster care.

The CFSR report identifies the following as common barriers with regard to achieving placement stability:

- The child welfare agency does not provide sufficient services to foster parents to prevent placement disruptions (21 States).
- Because of a lack of available placements, placement decisions tend to be based on what is available rather than on what is appropriate for the child (21 States).
- Emergency shelters frequently are used for initial placements and as temporary placements after a disruption occurs (18 States).
- There is a scarcity of appropriate placement options for children with developmental disabilities or behavioral problems (19 States).

With regard to age-appropriate placements, it was found that in most States, only a small percentage of children age 12 and younger are placed in a group home or institution. The percentage of children age 12 and younger who were placed in either a group home or an institution (combined) ranged across States from 2.3 to 34.7, with a median of 8.6.

Summary of Performance

The results of the analyses of State performance on the Report to Congress outcomes suggest that many States are moving in the direction of improved performance, particularly with regard to reducing maltreatment of children in foster care by foster parents or facility staff members, achieving permanency for children in foster care, and ensuring placement stability for children during the first 12 months that they are in foster care. However, as in prior years, the analyses for FY 2002 indicate that many States continue to experience challenges in reducing the incidence of maltreatment recurrence. In addition, some States continue to experience challenges in finding permanent homes for children who have a diagnosed disability; children who enter foster care when they are adolescents; children who are Black; and children who are Alaska Native/Native American.

The results also indicate that many States experience success in reunifying children in a timely manner. However, this success is tempered by the consistent finding of a positive correlation between the percentage of

reunifications within 12 months and the percentage of children entering foster care who were re-entering within 12 months of a prior episode. In addition, although there was an increase in the number of States exhibiting improvements with regard to achieving adoptions within 24 months of a child's entry into foster care, States continue to experience challenges in this area. CFSR findings suggest that efforts to achieve timely adoptions are often impeded by the reluctance on the part of some judges and agency staff to seek termination of parental rights (TPR), and the lengthy legal procedures often required to achieve a final TPR.

Finally, the findings of the analyses of the relationships between contextual factors and performance on the outcome measures suggest that interpretation of a State's performance on any of the measures must take into account key context variables relevant to that State. These findings also suggest that further research is necessary to explain some of the inter-relationships between context and outcome performance and to identify the extent of the impact of contextual factors on performance and potential intervening variables.